

Honorable Julius Genachowski, Chairman  
Commissioner Michael J. Copps  
Commissioner Robert M. McDowell  
Commissioner Mignon Clyburn  
Commissioner Meredith Attwell Baker  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 Twelfth Street SW  
Washington, DC 20554

Re: CG Docket Nos. 03-123 and 10-51

Dear Chairman Genachowski and Commissioners Copps, McDowell, Clyburn, and Baker,

Ensuring that deaf individuals have access to VRS and encouraging improvements in VRS should be a high priority for you as Chairman and Commissioners of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires the FCC to make available to all deaf individuals nationwide “functionally-equivalent” communications. VRS is the closest thing there is at this point, tho not perfect, it is light-years beyond TTY communication. My company is committed to providing the the best relay service and providing the best interpreters; this committment has them investing in technology enhancements and interpreter skill development.

As an employee of a Video Relay Service (VRS) provider, I have the great fortune of assisting deaf individuals to communicate via videophone in American Sign Language using VRS. For so many deaf individuals English is not their native language, it may not even be their second language, and being able to smoothly communicate in sign (their language) allows them access to the rest of the world. This service allows individuals access to all realms of communication from accessing needed social services and medical assistance even 911, pursuing educational opportunites, being self-sufficient not having to depend on hearing relatives, and even starting and running their own businesses. I have seen first-hand that this life-altering broadband service is a vital link that connects deaf people to the hearing community.

You will soon determine the future of VRS. When you set the VRS rate, you will determine whether America makes progress toward the statutory goals of functional equivalence, nationwide access and inclusion “ or force deaf users to revert to antiquated TTY communications. And, you will determine whether VRS fulfills its potential to drive broadband adoption by the deaf, even in the face

of poverty and isolation.

The FCC should be increasing the availability and use of VRS, not cutting back. You should adopt a rate that encourages continuing improvements in VRS technology and continues to improve services levels. Recent developments in VRS are a good example of how the service can be improved, such as enhanced 911 services, 10-digit numbering, a larger and better-trained pool of interpreters and better videophones with an array of enhanced features. Monthly payments for broadband are a big expense for many deaf people, and instead of trying to cut back on VRS, you should be exploring ways to make VRS over broadband more affordable to deaf individuals.

Progress towards functional equivalence will be destroyed if the FCC does not encourage VRS providers to improve VRS and make it more widely available. VRS is a recent and dramatic advancement that benefits those who are deaf, but so much more can be done. It would be tragic if the FCC were to destroy this broadband service that is so vital to the deaf. VRS and the improvements made to it over the years have moved us closer to the goal of "functional equivalence" mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act. The FCC rate proposal would destroy that progress and move us further from achieving the goals of the ADA!

I was shocked and rather disturbed to see the Commission's recent Public Notice on VRS rates. That you proposed different rates for different companies, this seems unfair. These proposals would put an end to VRS as we know it. My employer has already informed me that if these proposed rates are adopted, our company would head into bankruptcy. This would be disastrous for deaf VRS users. With the current industry standards for VRS such as "speed of answer", there is no way that other VRS providers could pick up the difference. The changes would be dramatic - gone would be 24/7 service and gone would be appropriate "speed of answer" numbers!

Recent reports of fraud in the VRS industry are extremely disturbing to employees who work for a company that has operated within current FCC guidelines and has worked to maintain the integrity of the VRS fund. The FCC must devote more of its time and energy to focusing on the elimination of fraud. But don't punish companies who strive to operate in an ethical and efficient manner!

I urge you to establish a fair and predictable rate for VRS that will encourage VRS providers to invest in improving VRS and reaching more deaf individuals. The rates are so low that it would be the end of VRS as we know it today. No provider would seek to provide quality VRS at the low rates

proposed by the FCC. I am at a loss to understand how you can suggest paying such a lower rate to company that provides excellent service, has been in the forefront of the industry, shows great integrity, and strives to provide this essential service as efficiently as possible. It is also not fair to provide a punitive rate to one company and to reward the least effective, cost-bloated companies, some of who have even been knowingly involved in fraudulent activities, with a higher rate! I urge you to establish a fair and predictable rate. Please do not destroy the progress that has been achieved and move us further from the goals of the ADA - "functionally-equivalent" communications! The law requires it and it is the right thing to do.

Sincerely,

Jacqueline Hoffman